

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

BY ROBERT L. JOLLES

One of the biggest obstacles a training department can face is a lack of respect and credibility from line managers and workers who think trainers' work is irrelevant to their own work. Here are some ways to avoid that training trap.

Training departments can take on many appearances. Some look strangely like personnel departments, while others look more like marketing departments.

In other cases, a training function appears so far removed from the rest of its organization that it attempts to reside as a department on its own. That would all be well and good, if it were not for the fact that the more removed a training department appears from the rest of the company, the less credible it appears in the eyes of those who depend on it.

Build credibility and respect

One of the biggest problems any training department must take on is the notion from the field that the training department is out of touch with what is really happening within the company. The problem is that the work of the training department may not seem relevant to the work of the organization.

This is one of the first—and often one of the cheapest—shots that a training department must dodge. At first glance, it appears to be a pretty good argument: How can a person teach me something that he or she is not currently doing?

A telling example occurs in sales training. Products change, as do customers and their demands. How does a person who has not been actively selling in the field effectively teach someone who has been? There is an answer, but it may be a some-

what disappointing one.

Build a qualified training staff. The first thing a training department must do is develop a staff in which most of the trainers have experience within the subject to be taught. This is a rather basic principle, but it is often ignored. When adhered to, it can begin to establish the elusive credibility that is a "must have" in a good training department.

Notice I said "most" of the trainers. I disagree with the notion that the department must consist entirely of successful field personnel. A realistic combination of talents can keep a department from tunnel-visioning ideas and techniques. Diversity breeds change and creativity, which is imperative in any department, especially a training department.

One formula for an ideal department calls for 75 percent of the training staff members to be from the field, teaching exactly the areas they previously worked in.

The other 25 percent of the training staff would have related experience—perhaps they have worked in sales, but not of the particular product employees are being trained to sell. Or perhaps they have worked with systems, but not with the particular system employees must use. The 75/25 percentage could vary, depending on the subject to be taught.

The next step a training department should take to build precious credibility is to develop a plan to keep the department relevant. In

other words, make sure trainers know their stuff—not only when they are first hired, but throughout their tenures with the firm.

Some companies think they are adhering to this simply by sending copies to training presenters, of all literature, magazines, memos, and correspondence that involves their particular topics of expertise. That is a nice idea, and I would recommend it highly. But alone, it is not nearly enough.

Presenters face more pressures in a day than most people face in a month. Coping with the pressures of good delivery and literally eating and sleeping the subject matter on a daily basis make a lot of the correspondence placed in the presenter's inbox meaningless. Even the most disciplined presenter has only a remote chance of truly being able to absorb all the information that is building on that poor, piled-up paper stack once referred to as a desk.

I am not for an instant saying that such information is not important and should not be read. But if it is critical, go over it in a team meeting or have people take turns summarizing and redistributing the information. Stick with the most successful approach to retaining relevance: Get that presenter out of the office on a regular basis and into the field where she or he belongs. One day of field observation or coaching will go a lot further than a week of perusing the out-of-control documentation disaster waiting in the

training presenter's in-box.

Getting trainers out into the areas where the actual work is being performed is valuable in more ways than one. It makes a strong statement to those who question the credibility and "out-of-touch" nature of the training department. It also does wonderful things for a presenter's confidence. Everyone's interests are served with a steady diet of field work for presenters.

Training can't solve all problems

The second problem in maintaining the credibility of training is one of the most frustrating misconceptions that most training departments must contend with. That is the notion that practically anything that cannot be explained away must be a training issue. This brings us to what I call the training "dumpster."

The ironies of training are astounding. First, this poor department, searching desperately for an identity, must work day and night to establish its own credibility. Then, almost as quickly as that credibility is gained, the department must contend with the idea that everything can now be fixed with good training.

Do workers have a performance problem? Send them for training. Are you losing good personnel? It must be a training issue. Are customers unhappy? Training is the answer. Is apathy a problem? You guessed it—the solution is training. I could go on and on.

Contrary to popular belief, not everything is a training issue. Unfortunately, if a department is not careful, it will find itself taking on issues it cannot and should not solve.

A series of four steps should accompany any request for training: consult, analyze, investigate, and pilot. Let's discuss each.

Consult to see if training is really needed. The idea of consulting takes on a slightly different connotation when reviewing a request for training. By consulting I simply mean asking questions. Before a tremendous amount of time and energy is wasted, it's a good idea to ask some questions regarding the request. Interview skills are particularly helpful during the consulting stage. This is the time to start asking questions

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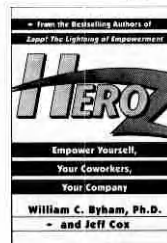
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of all those who are even remotely involved with the situation.

Let's look at a typical example. Say I am managing a telephone hot line. The director notifies me of an increase in customer complaints due to rudeness from the operators. The director has immediately pegged the situation as "another training problem."

Before a lot of money is wasted on a problem that may not be, it's time to ask some questions—of a lot of people.

I am most interested in hearing from the customers—the dissatisfied and the satisfied. I want to hear from the operators, including both those with a record of some complaints, and those without complaints, as well as both tenured operators and new hires. I want to hear from supervisors as well as upper management. Basically, I want to hear from just about anyone who has a relationship with this department and its duties.

There is a game plan to this questioning. I want answers to several questions:

- ▶ "How long has this been going on?"
- ▶ "How often has it occurred?"
- ▶ "How severe is the problem?"
- ▶ "What are the repercussions of the problem?"
- ▶ "What other actions, if any, have been taken in the past?"

What I want this sampling of questions to accomplish is twofold. First, it can help me begin to see if the problem really exists. Second, it can let me know for sure that I am not reinventing the wheel. In many cases, similar problems may have existed and been dealt with in successful or unsuccessful ways a generation ago (that's about two years in a typical training department). I want to know about them!

Analyze the potential audience. It's not that I'm a skeptic...exactly. It's just that to be totally sure that a problem exists—and to add some real-world experiences to the potential training to be conducted—it would be a good idea to observe and analyze the expected audience for your training. This should settle any last-minute doubts and begin to direct you toward selecting the appropriate training package.

Research the training curriculum.

Now that everyone involved has been consulted and the situation in question has been analyzed, it is time to research and select the training curriculum. If time is an issue, benchmarking may be of help.

Selecting the format of the training is almost as important as the curriculum itself. How long will the program you are selecting be? How interactive and participative would you like it to be? You may be able to answer such questions by looking at the background of the audience and the size of the seminar you intend to teach.

Pilot test a training program. Once the curriculum has been chosen, it is finally time to conduct the seminar. If the course is going to be taught more than one or two times, it is vital to take a look at its effectiveness. This practice isn't limited to training design. For example, it is rare for a restaurant chain to introduce new menu selections nationwide without setting up a few test sites first. It's better to make a little mistake than a large one.

Studying and reading a training curriculum is one thing; teaching it is another. A pilot will allow you to test the curriculum and its effectiveness. Be warned. Pilots are not a whole lot of fun.

You must follow a few important rules.

First, to make a fair observation, the curriculum must be delivered as it is written, with little or no deviations by the instructor. That means no war stories, no analogies, and no embellishments. The idea is to see if the curriculum is strong enough as written. This point is especially critical if more than one instructor will be teaching the seminar. The curriculum must be able to be handed off and taught effectively.

Presenters can complicate the evaluation through the injection of their personal styles into the training. That can set up a scenario in which students evaluate the trainer's style rather than the curriculum. But other presenters may not be able to duplicate one trainer's individual style.

The fact of the matter is that a good presenter can make the art of paint-drying an interesting topic, if he or she is allowed to embellish. Unfortunately, such presenters do

not grow on trees. And having trainees' perceptions of the course itself influenced by a trainer's unique style does not help anyone to evaluate the new training curriculum on its own merit. Piloting means that curriculum is delivered word for word, as written. That allows for a true test of the curriculum's potential success or failure.

Not a whole lot of presenters will volunteer for this hazardous duty, this author included. But it is what is necessary to truly test the material.

Finally, when preparing to launch a new training campaign, it is important to set up some sort of measurement system to evaluate its effectiveness.

Think positively. What are you going to use as evidence that the course is a success and that the original problem has been fixed? Taking such measurements before the actual training takes place allows for a fair and unbiased appraisal once the program kicks off. For obvious reasons, the same measurements that are established before training also must be taken again after training. You can't objectively prove anything without an apples-to-apples comparison.

Trying to solve all of life's problems through a dumpster called training is a hazard that awaits most training departments. Be careful. It can weaken the credibility of the training department, as well as damage the morale of the trainers who represent the department.

Validating your training programs

One of many obstacles that a training department has to face is proving its own validity. It seems that in corporate America, you either believe in the idea of training, or you do not. Few businesspeople seem to shy away from expressing strong opinions supporting one side or the other. The unfortunate truth is that those who oppose training can make a fairly strong argument, as long as they are not pressed too hard.

A common argument involves a somewhat harmless, even insignificant little word. It is really all that training foes have to bring into battle with them. But for those who oppose training as a solution, this word is used as a battle cry. The word is "results."

It's not that I am opposed to results. But many people look in the wrong areas for results.

Consider an example from outside of the workplace. When I decided to become a runner, a friend put me on a rather strict running program of about 5 miles a day, over the same course each day. He promised that if I stuck with it, I would notice appreciable results after one week. That sure sounded good to me, so off we went on my first training run. When we finished, I was tired and panting. I checked my watch. It had taken about 35 minutes, and was I ever out of breath! I realized I had a long way to go.

Night after night, I ran alone—the same 5 miles, over the same course. What frustrated me was the fact that my time was not improving dramatically, though I knew in my heart that I was giving it my all. Finally, as I neared the end of my second week, I called my friend, frustrated, to voice my displeasure with his techniques and my physical prowess. He seemed confused and promised a run together the next night.

Together again we ran the same 5 miles. Almost gloating with an "I told you so" attitude, I pointed to my watch and showed him the time. It had not improved much at all. My friend was somewhat bewildered. He said he never told me my time would improve dramatically in one or two weeks. He told me I would see results. He told me to look at my rate of breathing. We had just finished the run, and I was breathing as if we had not even started. It was a classic case of looking in the wrong place for the wrong results.

The problem that most training departments must cope with is similar to that story. Those who fund and support training must show results. But those who are trying to determine training results often look in the wrong place for them.

Sometimes we look to see just how much more an employee is selling after training, and we do not notice an appreciable difference—certainly not enough to warrant the enormous expense of training! But we may fail to look at the immediate and major improvement in customer service from a salesperson who becomes more polished and confident. Such results pay

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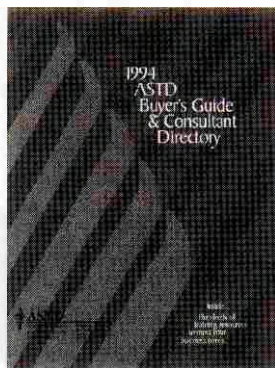
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dividends for many years. In the long term, that represents big bucks.

We may be automating an office environment and conducting technical training. In the short term, it costs money to send a presenter to that workplace, and even more in lost production. Some people argue that these employees could learn from each other, or on their own time.

After training, the speed of those who participated has not gone up. But maybe the error rate has dropped. If nothing else, morale might have improved with good, effective training. The last time I asked my management-training colleagues, they quoted a figure of \$15,000 as the cost of hiring and then losing an employee. Improved morale can lead to lower turnover. So in the long term, there is no contest.

Remember, the long term means you are going to have to wait for results—maybe for years. Unfortunately for those who do not enjoy a good mystery, the cost of tracking and measuring these results can cost more than the training itself. So let's at least make sure we are looking in the right place and taking the correct measurements.

Convincing your organization of the importance of training can be a challenging sale, to say the least. For the most part, we must remind ourselves over and over again that, as with returns from a good stock, training results are more accurately and fairly measured over the long term. ■

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